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Christianity as a Vocation: The Rostrevor Benedictines and the Renewal of Faith in Ireland

By Gladys Ganiel

Introduction

The island of Ireland's long tradition of saints and scholars is world-renowned. Geraldine Smyth, whose contributions we honour in this volume, can be seen as part of this tradition. Her life's work as a scholar and as a Dominican has embodied the ideal of living out Christianity as a vocation.

Official 'vocations' to the clergy or the religious orders have been declining steadily in Ireland. But in 2004, Ireland's first new Benedictine Monastery for 800 years was established in Rostrevor, Co. Down. Today, six monks – from Belfast, France, Scotland and Mexico – live out their vocation there and invite the people of Ireland to join them on this journey.

I first learned about Holy Cross when the Irish School of Ecumenics began research for its 'Visioning 21st Century Ecumenism' project. The project included theological and sociological elements and while Geraldine Smyth was a part of the theological arm of the project, it was she who recommended that Holy Cross should be one of eight sociological case studies of 'expressions of faith' in Ireland. I was responsible for conducting this case study, which involved 21 interviews with monks and with people who come to the monastery.¹ This chapter is based on that research. It explores how Holy Cross has re-introduced the idea of vocation into the minds of a range of Christians on the island of Ireland. This does not mean that there are now many people considering becoming clergy or joining religious orders. Rather, people have observed how the monks live out their vocation for ecumenism and reconciliation, and have been inspired to live out similar vocations in their own lives. For them, Holy Cross embodies a new vision of the church in Ireland, one that encompasses all Christian denominations and places the empowerment and spiritual development of laypeople at its centre. The monastery fosters this vision by providing a safe space not only where Christians from various denominations can interact, but also a place where silent reflective prayer and meditation upon scripture are encouraged.

The chapter begins with a brief recounting of the story of the Rostrevor Benedictines, focusing on their 'call' to come to Northern Ireland. It then describes how the Rostrevor Benedictines have reintroduced the idea of vocation to those who come to the monastery. A picture of this vocationally-based, new vision of the church in Ireland is painted through sections devoted to 'living ecumenism' and 'creating safe spaces'. The work of the Rostrevor Benedictines may seem limited because of the small scale of the changes among individuals. But Holy Cross Monastery is just one of multiple 'extra-institutional' spaces in Ireland's changing religious landscape. From their strategic positions on the margins, extra-institutional expressions of religion may prompt more significant changes in religious practice than initially seem possible.

The story of the Rostrevor Benedictines

Perhaps it goes without saying that it is unusual, unprecedented even, for a new monastery to open in Ireland. The monks, and some of the other people I interviewed, spoke about how this came to be in providential, even miraculous, terms. The immediate chain of events was set in motion in 1996, with Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, which called on contemplative monasteries to pursue spiritual ecumenism. As explained on the monks' Facebook page: 'Our coming to Northern Ireland is a response to a call addressed by the Church to monasteries of contemplative life to engage themselves in the mission of spiritual ecumenism, rooted in prayer, conversion of heart and charity, in those corners of the world where Christians are divided'.²

But the story extends further back than 1996, and is entwined in the personal biographies of the monks. All of the monks spoke of how events in their own pasts had fostered in them intense desires to devote their lives to Christian unity. For several, this desire was nurtured through the spirituality they encountered at the ecumenical Taizé community in France.

Perhaps of all the monks, the personal biography of the superior of the community, Dom Mark-Ephrem Nolan, is bound up with the founding of Holy Cross. He grew up in Belfast during the Troubles, observing a Catholic mother who made it a priority to worship with Protestants. He said:

My mother, who's neither a psychologist nor a theologian, decided fairly early on through personal contact with people that we would be exposed to worshipping in other churches. There was a Presbyterian neighbour who was like a grandmother figure to us.

This meant that as well as attending mass, Dom Mark was taken to worship in Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist churches. His mother attended a Tuesday morning prayer meeting with Protestants on the Shankill Road. Dom Mark said that despite initial efforts to get his mother 'saved' in the Protestant-evangelical sense, 'she became known as the little Catholic Christian – the type of Christian who is somebody who is saved'. He was eleven years old in August 1969, and remembers vividly when Protestants from the Shankill burnt the houses of Catholics living in Bombay Street, off the Falls Road. As soon as his mother heard the news, she took him and his two sisters to the house of a Protestant friend to pray.

Dom Mark said he did not think much about Ireland during his early years as a monk in Bec, France. In 1982, the Abbot of Bec, Dom Paul Grammont, was invited to a meeting with Anglican Archbishop Robert Runcie and Pope John Paul II at Canterbury Cathedral. There, Abbot Grammont met the then Archbishop of Armagh, Cardinal Tomás Ó'Fiaich. Dom Mark writes that Ó'Fiaich 'made a profound impact upon the former, awakening within him a spiritual intuition which would eventually lead to the establishment of a "cella" of Bec in the Diocese of Down and Connor'.³ Dom Mark said that when Abbot Grammont returned to Bec, 'he said to me on Pentecost morning: "the Archbishop of Armagh was there yesterday and I met him. We'll talk about that at a later date."' But that was about it'. Later that year, Dom Mark and Bro Eric were sent to Taizé in preparation for Bro Eric's ordination. While they were there, during prayer around the cross, Dom Mark said:

I had a kind of a realisation that the dismembered, broken body of Christ was not just this icon, but it was the church in Northern Ireland. There was a sense in which a responsibility was given to me in regard to the church here again.

A similar experience happened in 1983, when Dom Mark and Bro Eric were sent on a retreat for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity with the Protestant monastic community of Grandchamp in Switzerland. Both experienced an intuition that they should give their lives for the unity of the church in Ireland. That experience convinced Bec to send Dom Mark and Bro Eric to Northern Ireland. Bec did not feel equipped to found a monastery at that point in time, so they were sent to live a hidden life of prayer. From 1983-1987 they stayed in various locations in Downpatrick and the Ards Peninsula, but after Grammont's retirement they were called back to Bec to fulfil new roles in the monastery there. It was a decade before the Abbot General of the Benedictine Congregation of Saint Mary of Monte Oliveto, Dom Michelangelo M. Tiribilli, visited Bec and designated five monks to go to Northern Ireland.

The monks arrived in Northern Ireland in January 1998. Their temporary residence was the former Retreat Centre of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles in Rostrevor. From this base, the monks began to live out their vocation. They established contacts with local clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, and people began to attend their

daily liturgies. In 1999 they started a fortnightly *lectio divina*, prayerful reading of scripture, for local clergy. In 2000, a local farmer and his wife donated nine acres on the Kilbroney Road in Rostrevor for the building of a monastery. After a fundraising campaign, the building project was finished 'just on time for the official opening of the monastery and Solemn Consecration of the church for the first day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, 18th of January, 2004.'⁴ The sixth member of the community, from Mexico, arrived as a visitor in 2006 and was received into the community in 2007. He made his solemn profession (lifetime commitment) on the first day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in 2012, at an ecumenical event attended by numerous representatives from different churches. Today, the monks continue with their daily Eucharist and prayers, all open to the public, and host people on silent retreats.

I interviewed the monks on a series of visits to the monastery, which included staying overnight on silent retreat and attending services and prayers. The monks told me about the history of the monastery, their personal faith journeys, and the everyday life of the monastery. When I interviewed people who visit the monastery, I sought to find out what part it plays in their everyday religious lives. I found people to interview through the guest master, Bro Thierry, who prepared a list of 20 people, including a mix of clergy and laypeople and different denominations. From that list, I secured interviews with 15, including two Methodist clergy, two Church of Ireland clergy, and a Presbyterian minister (two of these clergy were women). Among the laypeople, five were Catholic, three Presbyterian, one non-denominational Protestant, and one Church of Ireland. Five of the laypeople were men and four were women. The interviews were conducted between January and August 2010, at the monastery, in the homes of people who come to the monastery, or in cafes. All interviewees were promised confidentiality, so their names were not used and some identifying characteristics have been changed. In the cases of Dom Mark and Bro Eric, it proved impossible to protect their confidentiality when telling the story of how Holy Cross was established. With their permission and when appropriate, their names have been used.

A new vision of the church in Ireland

The Rostrevor Benedictines have re-introduced the idea of vocation into the minds of a range of Christians on the island of Ireland. Some people linked this vocation specifically to improving relationships between Christians of various traditions. But the monastery is more than a place that inspires a living ecumenism, which is carried from behind the monastery walls by those who go back into their own parishes and congregations. People also spoke about how the monastery was for them a safe space that empowered them to live out their faith, through encouraging practices such as reflective prayer and meditation upon scripture. In this way, a new vision of the church in Ireland is being built by the Christians who engage with one another at Holy Cross. It is a church with an empowered laity at its centre.

Living ecumenism

The vision of welcoming multiple Christian traditions is embedded in the architecture of the Rostrevor Benedictines' purpose-built monastery, especially the chapel where people meet for prayer and worship. Its various features symbolise the ideals of gathering, unity and harmony. Architect Brian Quinn of Belfast was commissioned especially to incorporate the natural features of the area into the chapel, including the trees of a nearby fairy ring fort, which are reflected in the round pillars that encircle the congregational seating.⁵ The specifically 'Catholic' aspects of the chapel, such as an icon of Mary and a small tabernacle for storing the Eucharistic elements, are located unobtrusively in a corner at the back of the chapel and to the side of the front platform, respectively. Outside the chapel, the cornerstone is engraved with the words: 'Jesus Christ, the cornerstone'. As you enter the chapel, there is a font and above it an inscription: 'One Church, One Faith, One Baptism'. At the front of the

chapel the seating of the monks is arranged in a semi-circle. An icon of Jesus on the cross hangs behind the altar, with the words: 'may all be one'.

Scripture and prayer are at the centre of the Benedictine tradition and the monks believe that these emphases resonate with both Protestants and Catholics who come to the monastery. They acknowledged that the stereotype of Catholics, especially in Ireland, is that they do not read the bible and that they prefer the shortest mass they can find. This stereotype often informs Protestants' understanding of Catholics and, needless to say, does not do much to build respect for the Catholic tradition. But when Protestants come to Holy Cross and find that scripture is given a primary place through the reading of biblical passages, substantial homilies that engage with the biblical passage, and the praying of the Psalms, they feel that they can find some common ground with Catholics. For Catholics, these emphases resonate with Vatican II and its drive to engage laypeople with the Bible. As one of the monks said, 'many, many Protestants are very attracted by [what we do at the monastery] because the importance given to the word of the Lord here is clear'.

In their everyday prayers, the monks pray regularly for the leaders of the Protestant churches in Ireland, communicating the idea that all are Christians, together. As Siobhán Garrigan has explored, this sort of public acknowledgement of other Christian traditions is extremely rare in Ireland.⁶ When marking special occasions, the monks invite Protestant clergy to participate in the main elements of their services – even giving Protestants the place of honour in these celebrations. Lord Carey, the former Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, preached the first sermon in the monastery at an Ecumenical Prayer Vigil on the eve of the Solemn Dedication of the monastery. Anglican Trevor Williams, a former leader of the Corrymeela community of reconciliation and now the Bishop of Limerick and Killaloe, also spoke at this service, as well as victims of the Troubles. Local Church of Ireland and Presbyterian ministers joined with the monks in an 'Act of Repentance and a Joint Commitment to Peace-Making'.⁷ The monks attend Christmas carol singing in the Church of Ireland in Rostrevor each year, and presented the Presbyterian church in Rostrevor with a pulpit bible to celebrate its 150th anniversary. The purpose in these gestures has been to communicate the idea that the monks consider all Christians their brothers and sisters.

The lived, and living, ecumenism modelled by the monks has inspired those who come to the monastery to develop innovative models of Christian engagement, models that promote better relationships and push people to think about unity and reconciliation. For example, a Catholic man talked about how the monks' example of reaching out to Protestant churches had sparked within him a desire to do the same in his own life. He mentioned specifically the monks' involvement with the Church of Ireland cathedral in Downpatrick, saying this had prompted him to consider attending Down Cathedral on a regular basis, as a kind of ecumenical tithe of his prayer and worship. As he left the interview, he said: 'If I take one thing away from this [interview], it is that I should get in my car some day and go over to the Anglican community in Downpatrick'.

An evangelical woman, who discovered the monastery through a day trip organised by her Presbyterian church, said she felt welcomed by the monks, as well as by the architecture of the church, which she found beautiful and inoffensive in its simplicity. She has since seen one of the monks regularly for spiritual direction. She said her time in Rostrevor has helped her to feel more spiritually at ease with Catholicism:

I feel much more at ease in my soul now, there's less angst about the whole Catholic thing. ... I suppose for the first time I have met Catholic people whose discipleship I have got to know sufficiently well, I have been completely blown away by it. ... I think they are the first Catholics I ever felt completely at home with.

A quite different example is the way Holy Cross has influenced a united Anglican-Methodist congregation in a working class estate on the outskirts of Belfast. I conducted a

joint interview with the Anglican and Methodist ministers, and a Methodist laywoman who had been involved with the congregation for 43 years. The two congregations had been sharing the same church building for many years. By 2002, the Church of Ireland congregation was considering leaving the joint scheme. But inspired by the joint Anglican-Methodist Covenant of 2003, they decided to 'take the harder path' and become a wholly united congregation.⁸ The process of unifying their two congregations had awakened in them a desire to commune with Christians from other denominations, and explore aspects of Christian spirituality that their congregations had not practiced before, such as contemplative prayer. These desires came to be worked out through Sunday evening visits to the services of different denominations, such as the Orthodox Church in Belfast or the Catholic Clonard Monastery in Belfast; and through visits to Drumalis, a Catholic retreat centre. The congregation's first visit to Rostrevor happened after one of the members heard Dom Mark on the BBC's Thought for the Day. Two members of the congregation then organised a small group to go on retreat. Another innovation has been a Thursday morning communion service, which is followed by 15 minutes of silent, contemplative prayer. This initiative draws not just Anglicans and Methodists, but also Presbyterians, and people from other local charismatic and Pentecostal congregations. The Anglican minister described it this way:

People are coming from all of those denominational backgrounds, so in some ways it's a mini representation of Rostrevor, even though we are not a religious order. ... Rostrevor's charism is very much for hospitality, unity and reconciliation, which is through their being together in community. ... I think that's why people are drawn to our communion service as well.

At this point, the Methodist laywoman chipped in: 'You can't help bringing that back from the monastery to your own situation'.

At the same time, they hesitated to call the work of their united congregation 'ecumenical', noting that the word ecumenism could be divisive among Protestants. Rather, they preferred to talk about the work of Christ as transcending denominational boundaries. They said they discerned the work of Christ in the monastery, that this nourished them, and that the time they spent there fed into the often challenging work in their own local context.

Creating safe spaces

Many of those who come to Holy Cross described it as a haven or refuge from their experiences in various Irish churches. For the clergy who come, Holy Cross was a haven where they could find rest and refreshment. Several of the clergy said that this was important because they did not find this kind of support within their own denominations. Some clergy had made it at least a semi-regular practice (a minimum of two times a year) to come to the monastery for silent retreat and spiritual direction from the monks. Some had been asked to preach in the monastery on special occasions. A Presbyterian minister talked about how the monastery is a place where she finds an unconditional welcome and can rest, as nothing is expected of her:

A fascinating thing about the Benedictines [is] they do not have the concept of time as I have. I'm always in a hurry, I'm always rushing, I always want things done yesterday, I want the world to change tomorrow. The day after is too long. And yet they do seem to have the capacity to live a day at a time, in a way that I don't, and in a way I suppose I envy them. ... I would go up for vespers and the thing that I like most about it is that at one level nobody gives a damn that I'm there, and yet at another level they are always pleased to see me. Nobody ever speaks to me because it's vespers ... and it's the only time that nobody's asking anything of me, absolutely nothing is being asked of me. If I want to be there I'm welcome, if I don't want to be there I'm not forgotten. There's ... something about the gospel in that that I find very attractive but I haven't got the patience to live it. But I'm very glad that some people

do live it for me. ... It's almost like, substitutionary atonement, they're doing it for me.

And a Church of Ireland minister spoke about the value of the monks' prayers:

I am blown away with this sense of mindfulness that the monks have. When they have said to me, we constantly pray for Corrymeela, and we constantly pray for you and yours and your family, I just find that amazing, that that they have made me part of their lives in their remembrance and prayer. ... It is a gift beyond words for me to be held in people's thoughts and prayers in that way. I think that's wonderful. And that's central to their ministry ... taking that relationship seriously and holding it at the centre of their concern. I think it's a wonderful example of Christ-like behaviour for me and that nourishes me hugely. So not just when I go and speak to [my spiritual director] do I know he's with me in that sense ... and it is wonderfully supportive to know [they are praying for me]. ... That is maybe the most important thing.

All the clergy remarked that even just a few years ago, it would have been unthinkable for clergy from all denominations to even visit a monastery, let alone feel that they were receiving such nourishing and valuable gifts from the monks there.

Ken, a 29-year-old 'non-denominational' Protestant from a medium-sized town outside Belfast, said he had been disillusioned by the churches in Northern Ireland because of how they acted or did not act during the Troubles, and because of what he perceived as a lack of attention to social justice. Although he attends a church now where he feels 'at home', he said he probably entertains more doubts and questions than most of the people in his congregation. For him, Holy Cross has been a place where he can explore those questions through silent reflections and through conversations with one of the monks, who serves as a spiritual director. Ken said:

I can be totally open with him about anything, so that's been good, because coming from the Protestant community we don't have someone that we confess to so it almost feels good for me to be able to do that.

He said he also has been struck by the monks' commitment to prayer – especially for unity and reconciliation – and finds the contrast between their silent prayer and charismatics' wordy, spontaneous prayer 'interesting'. He said he understands that the monks believe that their prayers are central to what they are in Northern Ireland to do, but he sees the real power of prayer in how it inspires people to act, for instance in promoting reconciliation or social justice. Ken draws inspiration for living out a faith focused on social justice from the time he spends at Holy Cross.

Among Catholics, Holy Cross provided an alternative, 'extra-institutional' space set apart from (but still part of) the Irish Catholic Church. Felix, who is retired and in his late 60s, became an 'oblate' of Holy Cross after several years of frequenting the monastery for Eucharist, prayers and retreats. An oblate is someone who commits to live according to the principles of monastic life in their everyday life outside the monastery, while at the same time maintaining a commitment to a particular monastic community.⁹ Felix discovered Holy Cross through a friend who also had encouraged him to read Thomas Merton, whose writings helped him through a difficult time. He described his family background as traditional Catholic, although he said that his father had a troublesome relationship with the 'institutional church'. At the same time, his father annually went on retreat with the Jesuits. When Felix was in his 30s, he was 'agnostic', but the experience of his father's death made him think again about Christianity and the church. He explained how his father called him to his deathbed:

In his last hours he was in great pain and said to me, "what do you think about euthanasia?" I said, "now, Dad, what sort of question is this?" ... I put the question

back to him, “What do you think?” and he said, “Well, I would have to ask, what is the mind of the church on euthanasia?” And in a way, that summed up his faith.

As Felix continues to draw on what he described as the contemplative and mystical traditions of the church, he said that this helps him to bear with his frustrations with the ‘institutional’ church in Ireland, especially the way it has handled the abuse scandals. Reflecting back on that seminal event in his life, waiting with his father at his deathbed, he said:

I go back to my father’s notion of seeking the mind of the church. I am afraid that if I were on my deathbed, I don’t think I would be saying to my children to seek the mind of the church. I would be saying to them: “Remember you are the church. You are the church”.

The message that the people are the church is also one that Michelle has heard at Holy Cross. Michelle was 55-years-old at the time of her interview and said that while she comes from a Northern Irish Catholic background, she thinks of herself as a Christian rather than a Catholic. She credited Holy Cross with helping her return to faith, but a faith that was more authentic, intellectual and mature than what she had found in the Irish Catholic Church. Michelle said that when she ‘began to ask questions about spirituality and wider questions’ that she would ‘go along to mass purposely to see if I could hear anything. I’m sure I might as well have been sitting out in my back garden, because I wasn’t hearing it. And I became quite annoyed at not hearing it’. She says of the Irish Catholic tradition, that the satirical sitcom Father Ted was ‘spot on’. She described mass this way:

What used to piss me off, going to mass before, was it was like the McDonald’s experience, fast food. ... They could get through the Our Father in five seconds. That used to horrify me. I didn’t know an awful lot, but one thing I knew was that the Our Father was the prayer that Jesus had taught.

Michelle first heard about Holy Cross Monastery from a friend who, knowing her interest in music, said: ‘I’m surprised you don’t go to those monks. Like you of all people.’ She says she told her friend: ‘That’s all I bloody need, running along to monks. I’m already having difficulty with the church, so please, spare me’. Nevertheless, she lives in the area so one evening, when the monks were still at the retreat centre, she went out for a walk and called in to vespers. She said, ‘I could tell you that moment I realised I was in the right place’.

She said she was an ‘overnight convert’ to Benedictine spirituality. She began reading about the Benedictine tradition and its emphasis on scripture, which encouraged her to start reading a bible that she had bought some years ago. But she was reluctant to trust the monks. First, it was in the back of her mind that they might not be in Ireland to stay, since when she first heard of them they had not yet built the monastery. Second, she kept waiting for them to do something to disappoint her. She told a story about an experience that for her was a turning point in helping her to trust their sincerity:

Seamus Heaney was coming to read his poetry at a festival, and I wanted a ticket. And the ticket office opened and the tickets were gone on the first day. I mean by ten o’clock they were all gone. Because they’d been pre-booked. And the people who pre-booked, it was very unfair. ... So one evening, I’m ... taking a walk and I meet [a member of the clergy]. ... who said, “Oh, did you hear Seamus Heaney is coming?” I said, “Oh yeah, in fact, I went to buy the tickets and all the tickets were gone.” ... But this person ... had bought ten ... and said, “Yes, I’m going to give five of them to the brothers.” And I thought, “Really, ok.” I could see it unravelling. I could feel this cloud coming over, on two levels. First: “They’re just like all the rest,” and second: “So that’s where all the tickets went.” So the Seamus Heaney event came and went and the brothers didn’t go. And the reason they didn’t go was because they were

monks, and they don't move outside of the community. ... That really, really spoke a lot to me, because they're intelligent men, they're well educated, they would have every reason to want to go see Seamus Heaney, but [they didn't go]. And this person, who obviously had reason for thinking that they ought to accept the gift of tickets, had got the tickets believing that they would take this favour. So in itself it's kind of like a modern day parable. ... So I knew then that they were intent on demonstrating what they were at is true.

Michelle said that she now tries to structure her day on the Benedictines' rhythm of life, including morning and evening prayers. She tries to attend mass or vespers several times a week, and goes to the monastery for mass on Sundays. She also is considering lay oblation. She too finds the monks' homilies more intellectually engaging than what she found in the 'Father Ted' or 'McDonalds' masses that she used to attend. She has been especially encouraged by the bold stand the monks have taken in apologising for and praying for the victims of abuse in the Irish Catholic Church. She said the monks also have called for a 're-formation' of the Irish Catholic Church, although they have not in their homilies gone into any specifics of what this might look like. Michelle said that their critique has meant that some Catholics she knows have stopped attending mass at the monastery, because they do not want to hear the church criticised.

Michelle said the education she has received through her personal study and her time at the monastery has convinced her that apart from the monks' mission to promote ecumenism and reconciliation, they also have a mission in Ireland to simply educate laypeople. She said that the education of Irish Catholic laypeople is especially lacking, and that any re-form of the church must be centred on a Christ-centred, biblically-informed, spiritually-balanced style of Christianity, as modelled by the Benedictines.

Conclusion: the dynamism of 'extra-institutional' religion

A limitation of every small scale, sociological study is that the results cannot be generalised to wider populations. A reader of this chapter might be convinced of the meaningful changes that have taken place in the lives of individuals associated with Holy Cross. But there is no way of demonstrating definitively that such changes are having or will have a significant impact on the churches or on society. Their new vision of the church in Ireland may be limited to a select few.

But in this and other case studies for the 'Visioning Ecumenism' project, I observed people who thought the 'institutional' churches were inauthentic and ineffective. So they used a range of methods and strategies to keep their faith alive, *outside or in addition to institutional churches*, especially the Irish Catholic Church. I have conceptualised this as the practice of 'extra-institutional' religion.¹⁰ The dynamism of extra-institutional religion depends on its place on the margins, critiquing institutional religion and providing viable alternatives to it.

It is well-established that religious structures can determine how effectively religious actors can contribute to change within a diverse religious and social landscape.¹¹ Denominations have limited effectiveness because they are often compromised by the memory of their previous partnerships with state power, and hampered by bureaucracy, slow committee-based decision-making, and the challenge of remaining faithful to denominational traditions. On the other hand, religious special-interest organisations are more effective, because they are able to make faster decisions, more forcefully critique denominational traditions, respond quickly to developments on the ground, and harness the energy and enthusiasm of committed activists. Similarly, in his development of the concept of 'religious non-conformism', Joram Tarusarira has argued that the effectiveness of religious actors is linked to their position outside or on the margins of traditional religious and political structures.¹² Non-conformists' structural advantage is enhanced by their deeply-held

conviction that they must act on religious principle to set the world right, for example through promoting justice and reconciliation. John Brewer, Gareth Higgins and Francis Teeney also observed that it is inevitably religious ‘mavericks’, brave individuals or organisations, which have been most effectively engaged in religious peacemaking.¹³ They argued that in Northern Ireland the institutional churches did little peacemaking work that was effective, and the more practical work that made for peace was left to individuals like Fr Alec Reid and Fr Gerry Reynolds, Redemptorists from Clonard Monastery, and Rev Ken Newell of Fitzroy Presbyterian, or organisations like Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland. Such studies emphasise that when it comes to achieving specific goals or contributing to wider social change, religious actors are most effective when they create spaces or organisations that inevitably begin on the margins, but from which people can communicate effectively with the mainstream. Communicating effectively with the mainstream depends on maintaining relationships with people from the institutions that are being critiqued – not simply critiquing the institutions and then refusing to engage with those who maintain them.

So while it initially seems that the marginality of a place like Holy Cross is a limitation, there is a sociological basis for arguing that a position on the margins can in fact be a place of strength. Occupying such a position does not guarantee that the people who are involved will achieve all the changes they would like to see. But at Holy Cross, Christianity is becoming for people something that they choose to live out deliberately and purposefully themselves, not something that is done for them by clergy. If extra-institutional spaces like Holy Cross are indeed helping to create a more empowered laity, wider change might not be as far away as it seems.

¹ Thanks to Shona Masters, David Masters and Jay Miller for transcribing the interviews, and to the research participants who read and commented on earlier drafts of this chapter.

² <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Benedictine-Monks-Rostrevor/222284801119630?fref=ts> (accessed 29-09-2014).

³ Mark-Ephrem Nolan, ‘They Make the Valley a Place of Springs’, unpublished manuscript, 2004, 1.

⁴ Nolan, ‘They Make the Valley’, 5.

⁵ Mark-Ephrem Nolan, *Fresh Springs from an Ancient Well: The Story of the Rostrevor Benedictines*, Belfast, Octagon Design NI Ltd., 2011.

⁶ Siobhán Garrigan, *The Real Peace Process: Worship, Politics and the End of Sectarianism*, London, Equinox, 2010.

⁷ Nolan, ‘They Make the Valley’, 5.

⁸ More at <http://www.anglican-methodist.org.uk/> (accessed 29-09-2014).

⁹ See Glenstal Abbey website and its explanation of oblation, http://www.glenstal.org/?page_id=261 (accessed 16-11-2010).

¹⁰ Gladys Ganiel, *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2016; ‘Loss and Hope in the Catholic Church Part II’, in *Doctrine and Life* 62.5, 2012, 35-46; ‘Loss and Hope in the Catholic Church Part I’, in *Doctrine and Life* 62.4, 2012, 16-27.

¹¹ Gladys Ganiel, *Evangelicalism and Conflict in Northern Ireland*, New York, Palgrave, 2008.

¹² Joram Tarusarira, ‘Religion in Times of Crisis in Zimbabwe: A Case Study of Churches in Manicaland and Its Theodicy of Liberation’, in Gladys Ganiel, Heidemarie Winkel and Christophe Monnot (eds.) *Religion in Times of Crisis*, Leiden, Brill, 2014, 93-115; Gladys Ganiel and Joram Tarusarira, ‘Reconciliation and Reconstruction among Churches and Faith-

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